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ABSTRACT

This report states the issues involved in the use of communicative tests, oral and written, to assess grammatical correctness among students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Experience with two English tests administered at the beginning and end of the practice teaching period of Dutch students training to become EFL teachers indicates continuing testing problems. These problems include the potential for grammatical incorrectness to be mistaken for poor comprehension, lack of clear definitions of effective communication, and the need to elicit a wider range of structures. It is concluded that (1) the discrepancy found between what is measured by the oral and by the written tests and the actual need for both tests should be examined more closely; (2) the development of a flexible but highly structured interview procedure for eliciting a wide range of critical structures should continue; and (3) the profession will have to be content with subjective consensus about quantifiable norms. The two sample English tests administered to Dutch EFL student teachers are appended. (MSE)

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CAN GRAMMATICAL CORRECTNESS AND COMMUNICATION BE TESTED SIMULTANEOUSLY?

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CAN GRAMMATICAL CORRECTNESS AND COMMUNICATION BE TESTED SIMULTANEOUSLY?

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1 Background

The purpose of this presentation was to invite discussion and advice as to the assessment of students' knowledge and use of the grammar of English by means of both written and oral tests of a communicative nature. These students are to become teachers of English as a foreign language in the Netherlands, where standards of correctness have traditionally been high, almost to a fault. Yet, as more and more emphasis has been placed on "communication" in the foreign language, it seems that standards of correctness become increasingly more difficult to maintain, particularly as the interlanguage we fondly call "Dunglish" is most intelligible to native speakers of English (becoming, as interlanguages are wont to do, increasingly more intelligible as the native speakers become more experienced in listening to it, or on occasion, use it themselves.)

While retaining a primary interest in "the message", and accepting the fact that the effect of error will in our case be more psychological and sociological than actually distortive of content, we continue to strive for a mastery of standard English which approaches the "educated native speaker's" as closely as possible.

2 The tests

An attempt to measure this mastery is made once before the students are admitted to the school practice phase of their training program and again, generally two years later, before they are finally certified to teach. One written and one oral test are given. The written test (See Appendix 3) is based upon one ore more sometimes marginally edited authentic texts, usually involving dialogue, in which selected blanks are to be filled with correct grammatical forms. Cues range from zero to multiple choice selection (See Appendix 2). The oral test takes the form of either a traditional one-to-one interview, with a second staff member present as evaluator, or of a discussion test, which is video-recorded and subsequently assessed by two staff members working simultaneously but independently. Global assessment criteria are used for both forms of oral test. Disagreement is resolved by averaging, argument or arbitration.

3 Problems

The following difficulties continue to plague us:

3.1 The written test, like any Cloze or Cloze-type test, requires reading comprehension at text level as well as grammatical operations at sentence or phrase level, and is as such a "pragmatic test", the only kind of language test, in Oller's view, worthy of the name.

Nonetheless, we question the fairness, c.q. validity of the (mis-)information being obtained when grammatical errors may be attributable to misinterpretation of the text rather than misconceptions about the grammar rules of English. If we were focusing on reading comprehension, we might wonder about the validity of penalizing errors, such as the contrast between much and many, which would not display misinterpretation of the text, but rather lack of mastery of a formal distinction. Neither staff nor students are anxious to return to strictly discrete point grammar testing, finding the present test form relevant and meaningful, as well as generally interesting to do. How seriously should we be taking our misgivings about the "impurity" of our testing procedure?

3.2 In the oral tests we continue to maintain that "effective communication" is the main, sine qua non criterion for success. We do not, however, have a clear or specific and at the same time manageable definition of what this is. We are able to count errors and note "strikingly good formulations" to the candidate's benefit, but we cannot quantify "communication." We find ourselves more sensitive to errors when overall content or sophistication of argument is poor, and vice versa. Can we manageably quantify and set a norm with any semblance of objectivity involving both "number and seriousness of errors" and "quality and effectiveness of communication"?

3.3 Even if we succeed in overcoming the above problem, we would still be faced with the need to elicit a wider range of structures than has often proved to be sufficient in the topical interview or discussion test. Upon analysis we are often amazed to find some of the most satisfactory performances have been given with recourse to little more than the Simple Present Tense, or even a rich collection of BE+ predicate noun/adjectives. We are certainly working on developing flexible elicitation techniques with which the interviewer can lead (force?) the candidate into using particular structures without making the interview totally pre-digested or largely predictable. One of the main problems we have is how to avoid using the target structure ourselves, so that, strictly speaking, we would have to accept an elliptical answer from the candidate, e.g.

Q: What would you do in Reagan's place?

A: Shoot all the missiles to the sun.

Another problem is suspecting avoidance, but being unable to penalize it when the "job gets done", e.g.

Q: What advice would you give this woman? (attempt to elicit should/ought to)

A: None. It's her problem.

We would like to establish, on a better basis than our mere intuition, how many and which structures we must succeed in eliciting (correctly or incorrectly realized) before the test can be considered to have covered a sufficient range of the grammar. How many of the structures must minimally be correct? Whould we distinguish between serious, minor, insignificant errors? What criteria do we use for deciding how "bad" something is? (See Appendix 1 for our present working list

of grammar points to be focused on).

4. Discussion, Advice, Comments

The discussion which followed both in the limited official time remaining and over lunch, coffee, tea and drinks, resulted in the following useful comments and pointers:

1) If we are interested in correctness, we must test for it, and forget about matters like seriousness of content and sophistication of argument, or at least exclude differences among candidates with respect to the difficulty level of content.

2) If we are interested in spontaneously correct speech, the written test is probably superfluous, or could be used only as a back-up check of cognitive compentence for those who fail the oral test. This of course assumes effective elicitation of a broad range of structures in the oral test.

3) One might be able to improve the efficiency of the testing program by using the written test as a screening device. Only those who passed the written test would be interviewed. If ultimately was shown that the written test is a good predictor of success in the interview, as far as grammar is concerned in any case, then the costly interview procedure could either be dropped or used in a limited form as a formal test of pronunciation.

4) We should not "worry too much" about the role of reading comprehension in our grammar test. But if we really feel "so guilty about it" we could select texts for readability with a comparable group prior to working them into tests.

5) It certainly is difficult to determine what "effective communication" is. The age and experience of participants in a discussion affects judgement as does the age and experience of the person doing the judging, particularly as this is based on one's experience with certain native language and educational backgrounds. The video-taped discussion which was praised as "impressively good" by one conference participant was called "boring non-communication" by another. The discussion form may seem promising in its efficiency, but will never give us the information we're looking for with respect to usage. We are advised to keep it as a diagnostic exercise, but not to base serious decisions on it.

5. Conclusions

By and large, the author concludes the following:

1) It would be well worth our while to analyze our tests closely. There seems to be a discrepancy in what's measured by the oral and by the written test, but is it smaller than we think? Could we indeed achieve our purpose with only an oral test?

2) We should definitely continue our efforts to develop a flexible and yet highly structure interview procedure with which we can elicit a wide range of critical structures.

3) We will have to be content with our subjective consensus as to quantifiable norms.

The author hopes she can report on further developments with respect to these points at a future conference.

Appendix 1

WORKING LIST OF GRAMMAR STRUCTURES TO BE ELICITED (WITH EXAMPLES OF TYPICAL "DUNGLISH" ERRORS)

1. contrast simple vs progressive form

   X They are having a scheme to fill in.
   X I have been doing the phonetics course three times.
   X He was saying thank you when I gave him a present.
   X My little brother plays in the garden right now.

2. simple past with adverbials of past ime or clear past context

   X Many children have died in the Second World War.
   X I have handed in my homework last week.
   X Shakespeare has not written some of his own plays.

3. Present perfect (progressive) to express up to now idea

   X I live here since 1964.
   X Jack is playing in the top team for 10 years now.

4. infinitive after DO auxiliary

   X We didn't knew him.
   X Does he ever comes on time?

5. Future marker to express future time in main or independent clauses (except for appropriate use of present tense forms)

   X Theo is ill until next Wednesday.
   X I give this to you in a minute.

6. No will/would in temporal or conditional clauses of future time

   X If I'll see him tomorrow, ...
   X When you will die, ...

7. Inversion in questions rather than rising intonation on statement form, unless this is the appropriate form for the context (expressing surprise, doubt, etc.)

   X That is a good book you're reading?

8. some/any (-one, -thing, -where)

   X I know I've seen you anywhere.
   X There aren't some eggs left.

9. much/many

X Not much people read good newspapers.

10. any/every (-one, -where, -thing)

X It's so easy everyone can do it.
X You can come every day in the week, but only once.

11. who/which

X The people which I mean...
X The rivers who divide the country...

12. adverb/adjective

X He works terrible slow.
X She's very good built.

13. have to/should, ought to; had to/should have, ought to have

X This is the homework I had to hand in last week.
X If you think I have to do the course again, I'll accept your advice.

14. for/since

X He's been here since 3 days.

15. comparison of adjectives

X It's the worsest meal I've ever had.
X I'm doing worser and worser at English.
X That's the most nicest thing you've ever said.

16. limited use of <u>there</u> construction

X There are flying seven planes a day to New York.

17. this, that/these, those

X This people...
X These man...

18. It is/they are

X It is the dogs that pollute the park for the children.

19. infinitive constructions

X I want that you do this for me.

20. various frequently occurring prepositions

X <u>on</u> school , react <u>on</u>, discriminate somebody, etc.

Appendix 2

GRAMMAR TEST INSTRUCTIONS

There are FOUR main types of blank-filling cues:

I. No cue given in brackets. Blank only:

Write any grammatical word or phrase which completes the context. Grammatical words are prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, auxiliaries and the like, NOT lexical words like small, dog, jump, green, etc.

Example: The new tax law discriminates ..... working women.

Answer: against

II. Brackets containing one word or group of words separated by commas (,):

a. Write down the correct form and order of the words given. Use everything given in the brackets, along with any helping verb (form of DO, BE, HAVE, WILL/WOULD). Do not use "modals" (see below) on this kind of item. In some items you may have to add a preposition (OF, TO, FOR, WITH, etc.) to complete the verb phrase.

Example: .....(you, always, smoke) when you're alone?

Answer: Do you always smoke

Example: Do you object .....(come) early tomorrow?

Answer: to coming

Do not make any additions to the words given other than the necessary auxiliaries or prepositions.

b. If AND ONLY IF you see an (M) in an item, use a "modal" (a modal auxiliary such as MUST, MAY, SHOULD, etc. or an expression of modality such as BE GOING TO, HAVE TO, BE ALLOWED TO, MANAGE TO, etc.) Do not use WILL/WOULD as "modals" on this test. Remember, do NOT use a "modal" unless there is an (M) in the item.

Example: I don't really remember who borrowed my book. It .....(M, be) Sam.

Answer: may (might, could) have been

III. A series of words separated by slashes (/):

Copy the correct choice on your answer sheet. Only one possibility is correct. -- means nothing is correct.

Example: John works evenings as .....(a/an/the/--) ambulance driver.

Answer: an

IV. Brackets containing one word either an adjective or adverb:

Write down the correct form of the word given.

Example: We walked .....(slow) away from the plane.

Answer: slowly

Note: At first sight these instructions seem overwhelmingly complex. In practice however, they cause virtually no difficulty. Most of the items in the test rather speak for themselves. We always do at least one practice test with a group of students before they encounter their first "real" grammar test, so that students in fact are fully familiar with the blank-filling variations. The detailed instructions are handed out with the test paper as a back-up reference.

Appendix 3

SAMPLE SECTION OF GRAMMAR TEST (104 items in total)

CHILDLESS BY CHOICE
(adapted from Newsweek magazine, January 21, 1980)

In Framingham, Mass., music teacher Leni Blumenthal and her husband Stan have decided not to have children because they fear a child could strain their eight-year-old marriage. Linda McGrew, who is married and runs her own vineyard in northern California, has rejected motherhood because she feels a woman's intelligence is better served "if she's not constantly driving the kids to ballet, gymnastics and piano lessons." Oregon bookkeeper Marilyn Cripe is a dedicated nonmother because she already has more things to do than she can handle. "I have hobbies and interests that I barely have time for now," she says.

..1.. (support) by the ..2..(women/women's) movement and the ease of birth control, more and more well-educated, career-oriented women are remaining childless by choice these days. Researchers 3....(study,now) the psychological causes and effects of rejecting parenthood, and a 2000-member support group for childless couples ..4..(spring) up, called the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood. The decision to reject motherhood is not an easy ..5..(one/--). "A woman ..6..(choose) not to have children ...7.(M, be) very ...8.(strong)," says Wayne A. Myers, a psychiatrist ..9..New York Hospital. "It's a rejection .10..(be) like her mother. She ..11.(wonder, also)..12. she's a selfish person and ..13.(M, worry) that she's not feminine."

For some ..14.(one/ones/--) the decision is ..15.(relative) easy to make and live with. The demands of working on a daily newspaper made it quite ..16.(impossible) for me to consider ..17.(have) children," says Charlotte Curtis, associate editor of the New York Times...etc.